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What do new evangelisation and the formation of missionary disciples really mean when it comes to people with intellectual disabilities? This article looks at how people with disabilities are both evangelised and evangelisers especially in relation to the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage *Adoremus*. Not only can no one be excluded from the joy of the Gospel, people with intellectual disabilities already make a rich contribution to the Church's mission and life.

Missionary disciples with intellectual disabilities

'We are all missionary disciples'. This statement made five years ago by Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium* may present a challenge, however it should not come as a surprise to believers. After all, the very fact of our baptism and indwelling of the Holy Spirit ready us for mission and the very nature of the Good News should impel us to proclaim the gospel. We are all called to be evangelisers both to those who do not believe and, in the new evangelisation, to those who have got lost along the way. If indeed we are all missionary disciples, what does this mean for people with significant intellectual disabilities and their communities?

It is tempting to see this question principally in terms of the evangelisation of people with disabilities and no doubt this is a significant and much neglected issue. However, much more neglected is an understanding of people with intellectual disabilities as evangelisers in their own right. To think that the new evangelisation is purely about 'us' and 'them,' as 'us' reaching out to disabled non-Catholics and to Catholics who no longer attend Mass for whatever reason, or to think that necessary engagement with people with disabilities is for 'us' to bring 'them' in from the margins, is to short change both the concept of new evangelisation and people with disabilities. Instead the new evangelisation holds the two aspects of being evangelised and being evangelisers together. This fits easily into Pope Francis' understanding of missionary discipleship where each one of us, whatever our abilities, needs to allow ourselves to be evangelised by others, and each one of us must find ways to communicate Jesus wherever we are.¹

Evangelised

The renewed interest in evangelisation sparked by Pope Francis and continued through the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales 2015 *Proclaim* initiative to support, inspire and encourage new expressions of parish evangelisation comes in the wake of considerable concern over church attendance, who is not in church and why. We know that in England and Wales a little over half of those brought up as Catholics still regard themselves as being Catholic yet three out of nearly five cradle Catholics never attend religious services. A recent report launched in March 2018 *Europe's Young Adults and Religion* highlights the large percentage of young people in the UK and abroad who claim to have no religious affiliation. In many parishes dismay over the current situation is often expressed in two ways: either the problem is unhelpful clergy and fervent laity, or the problem is apathetic laity and hard working clergy; and the solutions range from compulsory Alpha courses, to allowing priests to marry, to having women priests.

Undoubtedly people with disabilities can be numbered among those who have no religious affiliation. People with disabilities are, after all, just people. Nevertheless, a serious question to ask is the extent to which people with intellectual disabilities of the profoundest sort and who are deemed to be non-religious can be reached while at the same time preserving respect for their dignity, spirituality and religious freedom. This is not an easy question to answer and it may well be that the solution depends on specific individual situations and also family

relationships and affiliations. Still, it is important to keep in mind that, as Pope Francis says, ‘the joy of the Gospel is for all people: no one can be excluded’.²

However the situation of Catholics with disabilities is one that does demand investigation since Catholics with disabilities are also among those non-attendees though often for reasons that can be addressed. Some Catholics still face barriers as they try to participate in parish life whether it is to do with the practical aspects of access, appropriate catechesis, reception of the sacraments, or with ministries such as reading or serving on the altar, and so they no longer attend Mass. Anecdotally this seems to apply particularly to families with children with autism or behavioural issues who feel unwelcome in their church communities or who are told that they are disturbing the worship of others. Equally problematic is when the families of people with intellectual disabilities are told that they need not attend church since they ‘do not need to’ because they are as pure as the angels. This is a significant theological mistake: human beings are not angels, they are human beings belonging to the very diverse human family. And like all human beings they require the sacraments and pastoral support.

Twenty years ago in 1998 the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales published the enlightened pastoral document *Valuing Difference*. The very title of the document is important, even if the language of diversity rather than difference is now current, even if some of the statistics have changed, and even if many of the challenges still remain. *Valuing Difference* provides practical advice on promoting access, inclusion and catechesis, and its conclusions still stand. Moreover, as the document suggests, inclusion and disability are the concern of everyone and often solutions need to be in response to particular situations and individual circumstances. Tellingly the subtitle of the document is *People with Disabilities in the Life and Mission of the Church*.

As *Valuing Difference* points out, simply by virtue of their baptism the faithful with disabilities are owed the same pastoral care as all other members of the Church. This has special reference to preparation for the sacraments. As Pope John Paul explains, ‘every baptised person, precisely by reason of being baptised, has the right to receive from the Church education and instruction enabling him or her to enter on a truly Christian life’.³ Since this preparation takes place pre-eminently in the parish, the parish has the duty to train catechists, provide necessary tools, make suitable adaptations and be attentive to the particular needs of those being formed.⁴ While every catechetical encounter should be personal and should encourage each participant to grow in their relationship with Jesus, in some cases, rather than a ‘one size fits all’ approach or special programmes that may isolate people even further, there should be a tailored approach that takes account of the person in their relationships with others and the community. Such a personal approach appreciates that every human being is personally called to respond to God’s call and to co-operate as far as they are able.

Providing adequate catechesis, and ensuring and enabling the full participation of people with disabilities in the liturgy and in the life of the Church is not simply a matter of justice. Certainly, families of people with profound disabilities, people who have no voice, want their loved ones to participate in the life of the Church and to receive the graces that God so freely gives to all. However participation in the life of the Church has deep theological significance: full participation recognises that ‘every member of the community has a part to play in the liturgy’ because the liturgy is ‘an “action” of the *whole Christ*’ of the whole community, the Body of Christ united with its head, Christ, where all are included.’⁵

While some of the challenges highlighted by *Valuing Difference* still exist, the vision of *Valuing Difference* remains as true today as twenty years ago. In this vision ‘people with disabilities, their families and carers, are encouraged to take their rightful place as equal members of the Church, with gifts to bring to its life and mission’.⁶

Evangelisers

When people think about reinvigorating parishes through new evangelisation often certain buzz words and phrases come to mind. Certainly talk of 'Divine renovation', 'maintenance to mission', 'intentional discipleship', 'awakening faith', 'rebuilt', 'building missionary parishes' do provide additional energy even if it is also wise to be cautious about their applicability to every situation. Of course the notion of missionary disciples is not new, as the Apostles demonstrate, even if the focus has turned inwards to parishes and the ordinary pastoral life of the Church. Moreover Pope Francis is clearly following in the footsteps of his recent predecessors. 'New evangelisation' was first spoken of by Pope John Paul II when he returned to Poland in 1979 and delivered a homily in a field near Mogiła, in the district of Nowa Huta: Poland and a Polish Pope where nothing is done without symbolism and drama. The ideal new town of Nowa Huta had been deliberately built by the communist authorities without a church. However the people demanded a church and, to make their point they raised a cross in a field where Mass was said by amongst others Father Karol Wojtła. When the cross was removed the people rioted. The people's struggle to have a church is now the stuff of legend. When the newly elected Polish Pope stood in the field under the cross of the Abbey at Mogiła he spoke about human dignity, about suffering and hope, about people who stand under the Cross and next to the empty tomb. Here, he said, is the Good News of salvation by Love. Each time the Cross is raised new evangelisation begins. For Pope John Paul II, for Pope Benedict and for Pope Francis new evangelisation is personal. New evangelisation demands that we move from a faith of habit to a personal encounter with Jesus, a faith that is conscious and personally lived. New evangelisation is a call to conversion for everyone.

This renewed emphasis on a personal encounter with Jesus shines brightly in the plan for a National Eucharistic Pilgrimage and Congress in Liverpool, to be held on 7-9 September 2018. Called *Adoremus* the elements of pilgrimage and congress or gathering remind the faithful of the centrality of Christ in their lives and in the life of the Church. While the event may not seem to have the symbolic power of Nowa Huta, the Catholic Bishops point out that the last International Eucharistic Congress in England was held in 1908 when permission for a public procession of the Blessed Sacrament was refused.

It may be fruitful to reflect on new evangelisation and missionary disciples with intellectual disabilities in the contexts of the up and coming *Adoremus* National Eucharistic Pilgrimage and the experience of Nowa Huta. The *Adoremus* initiative demonstrates that the Eucharist has the central place, as source and summit, in the life and mission of the Church.⁷ In its series of reflections on the way in which we participate in Adoration the Bishops' Conference Spirituality Committee highlights gesture, silence, being present, humility, waiting, and also struggling with occasions when God asks of us what we ourselves may not want. Obviously these reflections are for everyone. However, it may be salutary to recall that the daily living of many people with intellectual disabilities is characterised by gesture, silence, being rather than doing, humility, waiting, and also struggle. For those who have never really thought about the spirituality or religious needs of people with intellectual disabilities, this is a timely reminder that spirituality, as Adoration before the Blessed Sacrament shows, is first and foremost the work of God.

If we think of the gifts that people with disabilities bring to their communities it should come as no surprise that there are some people with disabilities whose encounter with Christ is already a significant witness to the working of God in their lives. Perhaps most well known are communities such as L'Arche where people with and without disabilities live and worship together. Perhaps less well known is a French contemplative community of religious sisters with and without Down Syndrome, the Petites Soeurs Disciples de L'Agneau who live out their vocation to the religious life together. Equally, there is the hidden spiritual life of the

voiceless whose radical dependence on others is also a radical dependence on God. These are people who already live and love Jesus, their faith and their Church, unashamedly and with simple passion, yet more often than not with no public recognition from others. These are also missionary disciples.

At Nowa Huta Pope John Paul stated that new evangelisation happens every time the Cross is raised and here human dignity, suffering and hope are brought by people who live under the Cross and next to the empty tomb. Certainly it cannot be said categorically that people with intellectual disabilities 'suffer'. Indeed it has often been remarked that people with intellectual disabilities carry within themselves joy, serenity and a level of trust and simplicity that frees them from the busy-ness of the world. However often people with disabilities of all kinds live under the shadow of the cross of discrimination, isolation, hatred or indifference. They also struggle to raise their own sign of faith in a world that appears hostile. Nevertheless, people with disabilities do point clearly to the personal dignity of all human beings. This is particularly the case since they challenge in their very existence certain assumptions made today about the power of autonomy, independence, appearances, function, speed, efficiency and apparent 'quality' of life. Moreover, in accepting their dependence on others they witness to the practical reality of human solidarity to a world that is in desperate need of a sense of hope and connectedness. In this way they demonstrate the real possibility both of being 'touched and healed by the beauty and richness of God's love'⁸ and of offering the hope of God's love to others.

Conclusion

The proclamation of faith belongs to all Christians whatever their intellectual capacities and no one can fully grasp by his or her own natural powers the profundity of what it means to say that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour. As St Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians (12:3), 'nobody is able to say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit'. This is where Pope Francis' words about allowing ourselves to be evangelised by others works out. People with intellectual disabilities who are also missionary disciples need the assistance of others to recognise and develop their vocation. This is especially important in a world that is often hostile to people with disabilities and reluctant to appreciate or even dismiss the gifts that they bring. But more significantly for the project of new evangelisation, the contribution already offered by people with disabilities is a wealth that the Church is called to recognise. If parish communities become more attentive to the needs of their members with disabilities, if they learn to see, judge what is to be done, and then act appropriately, we will be forming people who are missionary disciples and who can be attentive and welcoming to everyone. If we recognise that Christ is at work in the lives of people who the world usually thinks are not worthy of note then we will realise that spirituality is first and foremost God's work and we are all called to participate in this work. Since transformation of the world and our parish communities through sharing the love of Christ is God's work, this work will not be in vain. If we realise the treasure that is already in the Church then we will all be enriched.

Pia Matthews

¹ *Evangelii gaudium*, para. 121.

² *Evangelii gaudium*, para. 23.

³ *On Catechesis in Our Time*, 1979, para. 14.

⁴ *On Catechesis in Our Time*, para. 67. *Valuing Difference*, pp.12-16.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Ad Limina Address to the Bishops of the United States On Active Participation in the Liturgy* 9 October, 1998, para. 3.

⁶ *Valuing Difference*, 1998, p.6.

⁷ *Lumen gentium*, para. 11.

⁸ John Paul II, *Homily*, 17th World Youth Day, 28 July, 2002, 3.